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Freelance writer and raconteur
Posted: July 8, 2010 01:46 PM

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DVDs: *Life on Mars*, *A Single Man* and *The Crazies*

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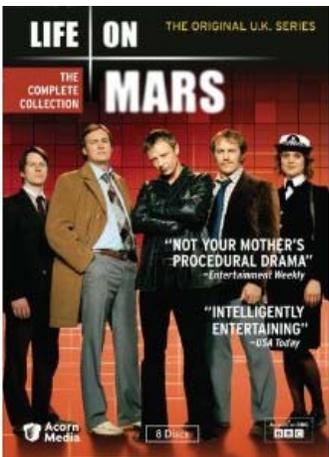
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LIFE ON MARS: THE COMPLETE COLLECTION (\$79.99; Acorn) -- If for some reason you haven't watched the acclaimed UK original *Life On Mars*, it's all gathered together in one neat package. Released separately as single season sets, the two runs of *Life On Mars* are here, with audio commentary, behind

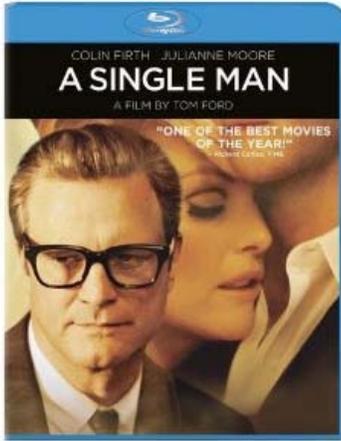
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the scenes documentaries and more. The story is disarmingly wacky: a detective is hit by a car in Manchester and sent back in time to the 1970s where namby pamby things like due process are far in the future for coppers. A US version was launched -- surely one of the worst ideas in recent TV history. An idea that worked perfectly in eight episodes, essentially a miniseries, and then duplicated less successfully in season two in the UK for another eight episodes was going to be expanded to a TV series that would need to run for four or five years and last some 80 hours to make money? All you really need is season one, but if you watch that, you're going to be sorely tempted to watch season two anyway, so enjoy.



A SINGLE MAN (\$34.95 BluRay and \$27.96 regular DVD; Sony) -- Designer Tom Ford makes an impressive debut with *A Single Man*, adapted from the novel by Christopher Isherwood. Ford co-wrote the script, produced, directed and (naturally) even provided some suits. Ford succeeds and the surprise is how he succeeds. I expected that at the very least he would have some strong visuals.

But in fact, the strength of the film is not some flashy or gorgeous visual style but the acting. Ford brought out an award-winning performance from Colin Firth (who got Best Actor in Venice), but then Firth is always an excellent actor and subtlety is his strong suit. But Julianne Moore is a very good actress who can be jarringly wrong if cast or directed poorly (see *Children of Men*). Moore is especially good here and perhaps the British accent freed her up. Matthew Goode reestablishes the sex appeal he showed in *Match Point*. And Nicholas Hoult of the UK TV show *Skins* is given a showcase for his charms that will keep many a fan restless with desire for days to come.

The story is simple. Firth is a college professor whose lover of 16 years (Goode) has died. He's mired in depression and simply lost the will to live. The drama is amped up quite a bit from the novel. In the film, Firth buys a handgun and meticulously plans his own suicide. And while his appreciation for men has come alive again (cold comfort since the love of his life is gone), the book didn't throw quite so many handsome young men his way (Firth is even hit on by a would-be actor loitering outside a liquor store). Two people rebuild his desire for life: lifelong pal Moore and the astonishingly pretty and clearly available Hoult, who somehow manages to maintain a sexual electricity whilst seeming to also appreciate Firth as a mentor and intellect. (It helps that he always refers to Firth as "sir" in a manner both playful and serious.)

Oddly, my biggest complaint is visual. Having the men Firth is attracted to take on an orange glow certainly gets the point across, but it hardly seems necessary. And I could have done without the bit of opera while Firth plans his own death (at least it wasn't *Madame Butterfly*.) This might have just been the passion project that Ford was meant to make. But it might also be the start of a promising career. At the very least, Ford has a fine eye for casting.

To Rielle Hunter

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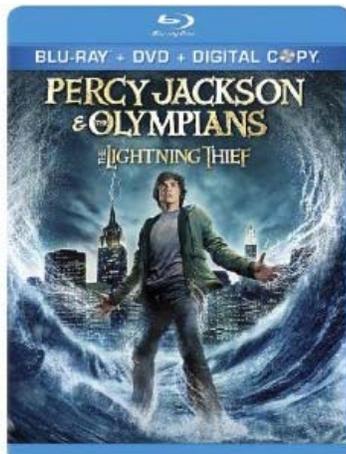
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Kourtney K.'s Stunning Bikini Bod



THE CRAZIES (\$39.98 BluRay and \$29.98 regular DVD; Overture) -- I am NOT a horror film buff. I like being scared sometimes but I'm no fan of gore. Horror just isn't my thing. Still, whenever a horror film gets especially good reviews or seems to be clever about more than just finding new ways to dismember teens, I take a chance. *The Crazies* proved exactly what I hoped for: a smart, nifty little horror film that always stayed one step ahead of our expectations. One sign of the movie's ability to deliver was the set-up: in the first act, we're told everything: yep, a pandemic of some sort is loose, driving people into maniacal monsters, it's the fault of the government and the government very much wants to cover it up. We don't spend half the film wondering what's going on or figuring out the conspiracy. Instead *The Crazies* lays its cards on the table and then works hard to maintain our interest. It's helped immeasurably by Timothy Olyphant of the late and still very much lamented *Deadwood* and the current fine tv hit *Justified*. He's the local lawman who does what he must to protect his family and battle both the crazies and the federal troops sent in to wipe out the evidence. Loads of fun, even if you're not the type who likes to squirm. It should have been a bigger hit; don't miss it now.



PERCY JACKSON & THE OLYMPIANS: THE LIGHTNING THIEF (\$39.99 BluRay and \$29.99 regular DVD; FOX 2000) -- The first and probably last in a would-be franchise, Percy Jackson posits a modern world where the creatures of Greek mythology are in fact very real. Our teen hero discovers he's the son of Poseidon and must recapture lightning and return it to Zeus before the gods go to war with earth and all its inhabitants crushed underfoot. Chris Columbus -- who made bland fidelity the driving template of the Harry Potter movies -- is similarly dull here. And with a far smaller budget: much of the movie looks more like an extended episode of *Xena: Warrior Princess* and minus that show's cheeky humor. Logan Lerman is ok as our hero, but he can't create magic out of nothing. And I know he's better than this: just check out his TV series *Jack & Bobby*. Interestingly, just as this film was underperforming at the box office, Lerman was making the short list of would-be Peter Parkers. He would have been a very good choice (though Andrew Garfield is excellent too) but with this movie as a calling card, it's no wonder he was passed over.

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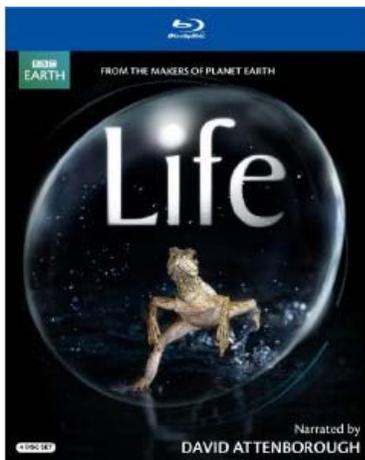
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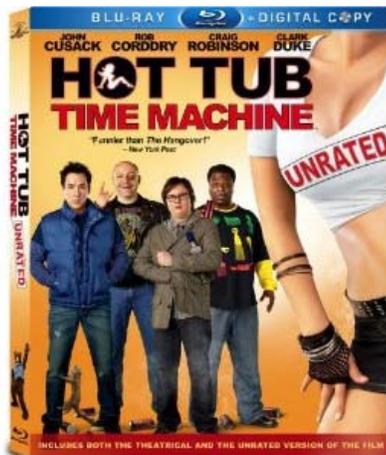
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LIFE (\$69.99 on BluRay or regular DVD; BBC/Discovery) -- The creators of *Blue Planet* continue to deliver some of the most eye-popping nature documentaries ever seen. Everything they do is demerit-worthy if you're trying to impress friends with your new giant TV screen and even BP executives would have a renewed appreciation for our fragile, beautiful planet and its remarkable diversity. Let me add that Oprah Winfrey is great, a titanic force I admire very much. But not as a narrator and certainly not as a substitute for David Attenborough. Attenborough is the Rolls Royce of narrators, especially nature documentary narrators; even David McCullough and John Gielgud would think twice before letting themselves go toe-to-toe with him. Which is a roundabout way of politely saying that you should be all means avoid the Oprah Winfrey version of this DVD and stick with the Attenborough version which is vastly superior. Mind you, it's silly of them not to include both narrations in the same set and just let people choose rather than release two separate sets. But they have and your choice is clear. Also out is *Oceans* (\$39.99; BBC) and the provocative *How The Earth Changed History* (\$34.99 BluRay; BBC), which correctly demonstrates the vast influence that forces like wind and seas have had on the rise and fall of civilizations.



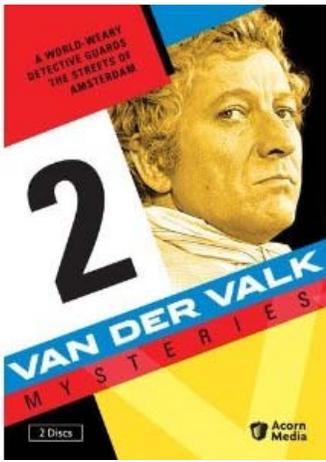
HOT TUB TIME MACHINE (\$39.99 BluRay and \$29.99 regular DVD; MGM) -- Yes, the title is the best thing about it. What's surprising is that we expected anything else, but that's the power of John Cusack, whose personal projects like *Grosse Pointe Black* and *High Fidelity* have proven winners in the past. Here, a group of buddies step into a hot tub and are thrown back into the 80s, thus given another chance to not let their lives sink into disappointment and resentment. Unfortunately, the tone is sour, the humor smug and mean-spirited, and the insights gained barely amount to more than the fact that knee huggers were a bad idea.



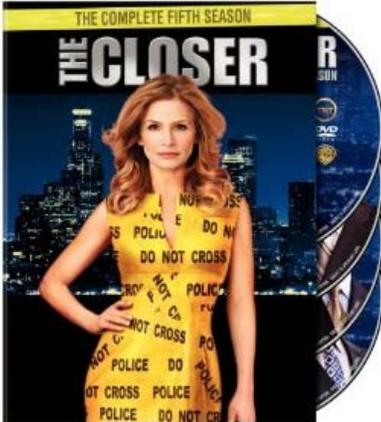
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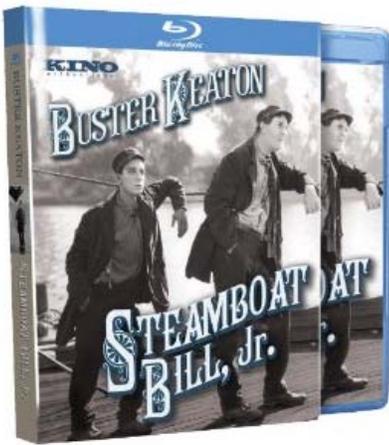




VAN DER VALK SET 2 (\$39.99; Acorn) -- If you've read and reread the Swedish thrillers about that girl with the dragon tattoo and are just waiting for the film versions, why not head over to urbane Amsterdam? There you'll find the 1970s detective Van Der Valk, who loved a good drink almost as much as he loved breaking the rules and tracking down killers. The second season of the show is filled with dead bodies, gritty realism and the irrepressible Van Der Valk, who reveled in tweaking authority (as cops have from time immemorial) and his lovely French wife. Fun for ardent mystery buffs but with the dramatic limitations of most cop shows pre-Hill Street Blues.



THE CLOSER SEASON FIVE (\$39.99; Warner Bros.) -- Kyra Sedgwick just got another Emmy nomination for her portrayal of Deputy Chief Brenda Johnson. Is it okay to say her character makes me laugh almost every time she's on screen, and not always on purpose? Sedgwick is playing a Georgia woman, but her accent is so broad and scenery chewing I just stand back in respect and awe. Johnson has quirks of course -- no self-respecting TV cop can go to work without quirks. In her case they're an affinity for candy and an ability to slap down a suspect in interrogation and "close" the deal, ie. get a confession or useful information. Invariably, each episode contains twists and turns but none as captivating as Sedgwick's palpable sense of fun. Oh her staff has quirks too. Nice try, but no one's going to outshine Johnson. Silly procedural fun, with modest personal storylines making it useful but not essential for enjoyment to watch it all in order.



STEAMBOAT BILL, JR. (\$34.95 BluRay and \$29.95 regular DVD; Kino) -- I don't have the time for an Ultimate Death Match between Buster Keaton and Charlie Chaplin (Roger Ebert is squarely in the Keaton camp, I believe). But of course the real truth is that you need both. And once you have *The General* (you do own *The General*, don't you?), then you need *Steamboat Bill Jr.*, another silent comedy extravaganza with one of the most famous sequences in film: the shot where the front of a house collapses around Keaton and he walks away seemingly oblivious. No blue-screen there of course and it just takes your breath away when you see the stunts he pulled. The Kino BluRay has massive amounts of outtakes, multiple scores, documentaries and more. Essential, which makes it sound dutiful when it should sound like the exceptional entertainment it really is.

Thanks for reading. Michael Giltz is the cohost of *Showbiz Sandbox*, a weekly pop culture podcast that reveals the industry take on entertainment news of the day and features top journalists and opinion makers as guests. It's available free on iTunes. Visit [Michael Giltz at his website](#) and his [daily blog](#). Download his podcast of celebrity interviews and his radio show, also called *Popsurfing* and also available for free on iTunes. [Link to him on Netflix](#) and gain access to thousands of ratings and reviews.

NOTE: Michael Giltz is provided with free copies of DVDs to consider for review. He typically does not guarantee coverage and invariably receives far more screeners and DVDs than he can cover each week.

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Hey! I liked the US version of Life on Mars. Darn good acting and a great story. At least they closed up the storyline once they knew they were cancelled. A great show though...

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Watch the UK one. No comparison - HONESTLY! Just try it.

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And then watch the UK sequel, Ashes to Ashes, to find out how it should have ended (spoiler alert: they are NOT actually on Mars).

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